

THE JULY 29 ORDINATIONS:
A Fact-and-Fallacy Sheet

(prepared by the Diocesan Committee to Plan for and Promote the Cause of the
Ordination of Women to the Priesthood)

The July 29 ordinations in Philadelphia of eleven women to the priesthood were a major watershed in the life of the church. Whether one affirms or rejects them, it is impossible to deny their impact. The words of the poet Yeats seem particularly appropriate here: "All is changed, changed utterly: a terrible beauty is born."

Unfortunately, one of the most visible results of this event has been enormous confusion. Opinions have been so heated, numerous, and contradictory that it often seems impossible to make any sense of it. What is validity? Regularity? Which canonical requirements were met and which were not? What went on in Chicago? What should we be doing now?

The following sheet is intended as a brief summary of the essential information bearing on the July 29 ordinations. We hope it will prove useful in focusing some of the issues involved and providing a basis for informed action.

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I. THE PHILADELPHIA EVENT

The following canonical requirements were met by the July 29 ordinations:

--All eleven candidates were deacons in good standing at the time of the ordinations. All had fulfilled their canonically-required tenure of six months to one year.

--All had the endorsement of their local vestries.

--All took the oath of conformity--and have since obeyed it!

--The service was completed in good order according to the 1928 Prayer Book rite: performed by four duly consecrated bishops and sealed in the ancient manner by the laying-on-of-hands of some seventy-five priests.

The following canonical requirements were not met:

--The candidates lacked the consent of their diocesan bishops and the approval of their respective standing committees.

One should note, however, the following special circumstances:

in the Diocese of Virginia: After Alison Cheek told Bishop Robert B. Hall that she planned to be ordained, he asked the diocesan standing committee to consider giving canonical approval. The committee voted 5-4 against, with 3 members absent.

in the Diocese of Rochester: Bishop Robert Spears, Jr., asked his standing committee to give approval to the Rev. Merrill Bittner's ordination; the vote ended in a tie.

in the Diocese of Pennsylvania: The standing committee refused to take action on the proposed ordination of the Rev. Suzanne Hiatt.

--The four ordaining bishops lacked permission from the Bishop of Pennsylvania, the Rt. Rev. Lyman C. Ogilby, to perform this ordination within his diocese.

--At the conclusion of the service the candidates were given Certificates of Ordination, but were not licensed as priests in their respective dioceses.

(PLEASE NOTE that the fact that these eleven candidates were women is not necessarily in violation of the canons. The underlying issue here, of course, is the question of whether the pronoun "he" used in the rubrics for the ordering of a priest is to be interpreted inclusively (that is, "mankind") or exclusively (that is, "male"); this question still awaits definitive interpretation. For our purposes, however, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the principle of women's ordination and the specific canonical requirements fulfilled and not fulfilled in the July 29 ordination. It is significant to note that of the five objections raised during the service itself, only one (from the Rev. George Rutler) suggested that the service was wrong because the candidates were women; this objection was made on theological rather than canonical grounds.)

II. VALIDITY AND REGULARITY

The ordinations, then, were admittedly irregular. But from this it does not necessarily follow that they were invalid; in fact, Anglican tradition argues strongly in the opposite direction.

The most representative Anglican definitions of regularity, efficacy, and validity are to be found in the report entitled Doctrine in the Church of England, of which Archbishop William Temple was the chairperson.

"The necessity and meaning of the concept of validity depends upon the facts that the sacraments are specially appointed signs, and that they involve representative action on behalf of Christ Himself and of the Church which is His Body. The meaning of the word valid is best defined by the statement that a valid sacrament exists wherever the specifically appointed conditions constituting the sacrament are duly and intentionally fulfilled." (pp. 130-1)

"A sacrament is called regular if it is performed in accordance with general rules laid down by competent authority for the due administration of the sacraments....If, on the other hand, the general rules governing the administration of a sacrament are set aside without sufficient reason, the sacrament thus performed is unjustifiably irregular, but it is still valid,

if the appointed conditions constituting the sacrament itself are fulfilled." (pp. 131-2)

"The appointed conditions constitutive of a sacrament, which are the basis of a judgement of validity, fall under three general heads: (a) appointment by Christ, (b) proper form and matter, (c) qualification of the minister." (p. 132)

--It is clear, from the previous lengthy quotations, that the Philadelphia Ordinations met all of the conditions necessary for a valid ordination, but that these ordinations were irregular because of the non-fulfillment of certain canons.

--It is also clear that this theological principle has long been confirmed in actual practice, particularly in the American Church. In two significant cases, those of Bishop Seabury in 1789 and of Bishop Wilmer in 1865, the leadership of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. moved eagerly to accommodate these irregular consecrations, both times in the interest of "reconciliation" and unity within the church. The irregularities they accommodated were by no means picayune.

III. THE CHICAGO EVENT

On August 14-15 the House of Bishops, in a special meeting called to deal with the issue, declared the ordinations invalid by asserting its conviction that "the necessary conditions for priesthood in the Episcopal Church were not fulfilled on the occasion in question."

Many people have interpreted this Chicago Resolution as some sort of official decree--tantamount to jury verdict--which settled the issue for once and for all. In fact, this is simply not true. In many ways the action of the House of Bishops is open to serious question and may have created more problems than it solved.

--To begin with, the theological basis upon which the meeting proceeded was characterized by haste and superficiality. The report of the theological committee, compiled in a single night, was largely the work of one man, Bishop Arthur A. Vogel of West Missouri. It displays a serious disregard for Anglican precedent and suffers from overall vagueness of terminology--particularly, in the crucial matters of "community" and "collegiality." For the House of Bishops to base a purportedly informed judgement on such insubstantial evidence can hardly be called an act of theological responsibility.

--More important, there is considerable uncertainty as to the legal weight and significance of the Chicago resolution. There have been several challenges strongly raised that the ultimate jurisdiction in this issue lies not in the unilateral action of one House, but at the diocesan level. Perhaps the most emphatic of these challenges comes from the lawyer, William Stringfellow, in a letter to Bishop Spears of Rochester, dated 23 August, 1974:

"I have thought a good deal about the legal significance of the House of Bishops' meeting and its resolution and reach conclusions which I have put in a short article...which will presently be published in Christianity and Crisis. From that you will see that I am convinced that the House, in meeting at this juncture in the matter of the Philadelphia Ordinations, was preempting, if not in fact usurping, the responsibilities and prerogatives of the bishops and standing committees of the dioceses where the various women priests are situate. Regardless of esoteric disputes about validity and regularity, the obvious and admitted canonical deficiency in the Philadelphia ordinations is the absence of approval by the respective bishops and standing committees. For the House of Bishops to act in the matter before each of these diocesan authorities deliberated as to whether they could ratify the ordinations and/or whether any disciplinary steps are appropriate was, in my view, an abuse of power. Having been nevertheless convened, the only proper action which the House could conceivably have taken would have been the issuance of a pastoral letter...The (Chicago) resolution does not gainsay or diminish the canonical responsibility of bishops and standing committees to examine the issues of regularity and validity, and to make their own determinations as to particular persons ordained at Philadelphia..."

Until these and other matters have been satisfactorily answered, it seems premature to assume that the July 29 case is closed.

--That the House of Bishops failed in its resolution to reaffirm its commitment to the principle of women's ordination (as it had in New Orleans in 1972 and Louisville in 1973) seems a serious omission.

--Finally, in its panicky insistence upon collegiality and in its refusal to deal with any of the wider dimensions of the issue, the House of Bishops, in effect, cast the "blame" for the July 29 event squarely upon the shoulders of the eleven women; this implication was strengthened in a patronizing second resolution offering the women "pastoral services or consultation." This aspect of the meeting has provoked widespread outrage. "An exercise of male arrogance of the most blatant kind," remarked Dr. Charles Willie, before resigning his post as Vice-president of the House of Deputies in protest over the incident.

IV. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

From the foregoing discussion, three things seem to be emerging:

1. That the July 29 ordinations, though admittedly irregular, are clearly within the limits of validity as generally understood in Anglican tradition.
2. That the meeting of the House of Bishops far from settled the issue.
3. That there is still a great deal of work to be done, both in the theological and legal aspects of this situation, and that much of this needs to be initiated at the diocesan level.

With these thoughts in mind, the Diocesan Committee to Plan for and Promote the Cause of the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood recommends the following courses of action:

1. Make your opinions known to the Diocesan standing committee. Urge it to take an active role in this situation and to move as swiftly as possible towards the regularization of the ordination of the Rev. Suzanne Hiatt.

Chairman of the Standing Committee:

The Rev. Ernest A. Harding, D.D.

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2. Urge Bishop Ogilby to license the Rev. Suzanne Hiatt as a priest of this diocese (normally a routine procedure handled by the bishop alone).
3. Suggest also to Bishop Ogilby that, in the next meeting of the House of Bishops (scheduled for Mexico, October 11-18), he urge his fellow bishops to reconsider the matter in the light of more reasoned theological and legal evidence, and in response not only to the narrow demands of collegiality, but to the wider and much more urgent issue of women's ordination to the priesthood.

(N.B.: A detailed report on Anglican precedent with regard to validity, regularity, and community is currently in preparation by a committee of faculty and deans from many of the country's theological seminaries. It is scheduled for completion well before the October meeting.)

4. Finally, continue to work in whatever ways you can--and particularly through your convention delegates--so that the next General Convention will strongly endorse the ordination of women to the Priesthood.

A SHORT READING LIST:

1. Women in Priesthood: a short, informative brochure, full of facts, figures, and common sense, available from the National Committee of Episcopal Clergy and Laity For the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood
The Church House
Mount Saint Alban
Washington, D.C. 20016
2. Conscience and the Canons: a helpful look at change and the canons by Daniel Stevick, professor of Liturgics and Homiletics at EDS, Cambridge, Mass., author, Canon Law in The Witness, Special Edition, August, 1974

3. "MEMORANDUM (on the right of the Bishop of Virginia to Ordain a female deacon to the priesthood under Canon III, 11, given the recommendation of the Standing Committee of the Diocese...)"

A powerful and provocative model for diocesan autonomy, prepared by the Rev. Henry Rightor, Virginia Theological Seminary, July 18, 1974.

Copies available upon request from the Diocesan Committee to Plan for and Promote the Cause of the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood.

4. The William Stringfellow article alluded to in this report is to be published in Christianity and Crisis, October, 1974.

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